Tactile Taxidermy: The Revival of Animal Skins in the Early Twentieth Century Museum

ABSTRACT

Taxidermy specimens are cloaked in animal skin; organic material that can decay or be eaten by insects. This essay examines the tactile relationship between this changeable skin-creature, and the figures of the taxidermist and the curator in the turn of the twentieth century museum. Using Bristol Museum as a case study, it argues that specimens were not inert or stilled within museum collections. It explores how taxidermy specimens were meeting places between animal remains and human bodies, as curators sought to remount existing specimens, and prevent them from deteriorating further. Taking a material approach, it examines how animal skins were physically shaped by human hands, and figuratively woven into stories of science, the British Empire, and the natural world.

KEY WORDS**:** animals, taxidermy, museums, decay, touch

INTRODUCTION

In 1899, the Bristol Museum removed its taxidermy lions from display. But they did not discard their lions. Instead, they had them remounted. The *Bristol Mercury* described the process:

> The three lions, Hannibal, Ajax, and General, and the lioness and her cubs were taken down, and entirely remounted. The whole of the skins, which were in a frightfully dirty condition, and moth eaten, were washed and cleaned and thoroughly preserved. Hannibal was given new handpainted glass eyes, and the cubs were also provided with eyes – these organs having been absent before.[1]

[1] 'The Talk of Bristol', *Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 1 April. 1899, 4. For more on this lion display see the museum's 'Annual Reports': *The Bristol Museum and Art Gallery: Report of the Museum and Art Gallery Committee* (Bristol: 1900, 1906), Bristol Museum and Art Gallery Archive, Fine Art Store, 6, 16; and 'Museums: Their Modern Development. Lecture by Mr Herbert Bolton', *Western Daily Press*, 26 May. 1899, 3.

As well as being moth-eaten, these long-dead lions had accumulated a layer of grime. They were aging museum artefacts, but they were also a part of the environment, as their bodies fed other smaller animals and collected the dust circulating around the museum. These dead skins were sites of change and exchange. When the visual signs of these changes became too visible – when the museum's curator Herbert Bolton judged the animals to look too old, eaten, and grubby – taxidermists took them apart again. Bolton recognised that holes and stains undermined the lions' potential to look lively, so he had them remounted. These specimens were unstitched, and their artificial insides were discarded. The animal bodies travelled from Bristol to Brighton, to the Brazenor Brothers taxidermy studios.[2] Their revival demonstrates the painstaking processes the museum and its network of taxidermists undertook to recreate animal form at the turn of the twentieth century.

Bolton, and a team of assistants, submerged the skins in water to wash away the dirt and dust, and soaked them in insecticides to prevent small animals creeping in. Taxidermists at Brazenor Brothers then reshaped the skins to fit their idea of what a lion looked like. Skins were daubed with more preservatives, so they were less inclined to rot, and these treated skins were then dried and placed on new bodily frameworks. Glass eyes were squeezed under eyelids. Here, when handling and arranging the eye skin, the taxidermist had to be particularly careful as this delicate, papery skin tears and distorts easily.[3] These lion skins were added to and amended, and their insides were changed. The only thing that remained after refurbishment was their original skins.

[2] 'The Talk of Bristol', *Bristol Mercury*, 1 April 1899, 4.

[3] 'The Talk of Bristol', 1 April, 4. For discussion on the delicacy of eye skin see: R. Ward, *The Sportsman's Handbook to Practical Collecting, Preserving and Artistic Setting-Up of Trophies and Specimens* (London: Published by Rowland Ward, 1880), p.47-8; and 'Skinning and Stuffing of Small Quadrupeds', *Scientific American*, 20 (1869), 357.

This article has two aims. The first is to examine the material importance of skin to the taxidermy museum creature, using Bristol Museum's specimens as a case study. The second is to explore the historical, tactile relationship between the human (taxidermist and curator – the latter a figure largely overlooked within taxidermy scholarship) and this skin-creature. Taxidermy animals, just like the wider museum spaces they were housed in, were sites of deterioration and renewal. This article tracks the evolving efforts of Bristol's curators and the network of taxidermists who worked *with* skins in the early twentieth century. Individual skins were not fixed. Nevertheless, skin was a constant in taxidermy. Techniques changed, and individual skins could be discarded, but the centrality of skin remained.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, scholars began to closely examine the taxidermy animal. This started, famously, in 1984, with Donna Haraway arguing that these specimens did not represent nature as untouched by human hand.[4] Not only were these creatures physically manipulated – killed, taxidermied, placed – they were also cloaked in layers of patriarchal and colonial narratives. The writer and curator Rachel Poliquin elegantly summarised these lines of scholarly inquiry just over a decade ago:

> In recent decades taxidermy has been critically reappraised as a historical and cultural object, by which I mean two things. First, the historical bracketing of taxidermy and the practices engaged in collecting and mounting animals, and second, an unravelling of the various cultural, political, and ideological forces which have shaped how nature has been used and interpreted within museums.[5]

The representational elements of the taxidermy creature have been picked over; its cultural construction emphasised, and its weird, object (pretending to be an animal) status evaluated. Steve Baker, an art historian and artist, described this as the 'gloriously dumb thingness' of

[4] D. Haraway, 'Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936', *Social Text*, 11 (1984), 20-64.

[5] R. Poliquin, 'The Matter and Meaning of Museum Taxidermy', *Museum and Society*, 6 (2008), 125.

the taxidermy animal, with reference to taxidermic art.[6] More recently, scholars have effectively explored how such creatures could become memory objects; prompts for the hunter to reflect on the hunting experience.[7]

These are all essential arguments to make. The origins of the taxidermy animal – often within the (white male led) hunting party – can be associated with assertions of imperial power over colonised places, and colonised people.[8] If we turn to the creature itself, it is an animal which can no longer run or eat or fight back. In many ways, it has been objectified. The singular taxidermy mount can tell us about the collective slaughter of thousands of other animals, about the endangerment and extinction of entire species, and about the wants and whims of the hunter or collector.

This focus on the cultural interpretations of taxidermy sometimes goes hand in hand with discussions of permanence and stability – and a sluggish stillness. The geographer James Ryan, in his discussion of hunting, taxidermy, and cameras, describes the taxidermy animal as 'utterly docile.'[9] These kinds of arguments are echoed by the anthropologist Garry Marvin, who describes how taxidermy has been 'domesticated.'[10] He adds, in a discussion on hunting trophies, that: 'although the biological must be rendered inert, taxidermy is not concerned with the preservation of natural objects, dead bodies. Taxidermic objects are not dead animals

[6] S. Baker, 'The Human, Made Strange', *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), p.53.
[7] See: K. Jones, 'The Soul in the Skin: Taxidermy and the Reanimated Animal', *Epiphany in the Wilderness*: *Hunting, Nature and Performance in the Nineteenth-Century American West* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), p.227-270; and G. Marvin, 'Enlivened through Memory: Hunters and Hunting Trophies' in S. Alberti (Ed.), *The Afterlives of Animals: A Museum Menagerie* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p.202-218.
[8] See: W. Storey, 'Big Cats and Imperialism: Lion and Tiger Hunting in Kenya and Northern India', *Journal of World History*, 2 (1991), 135-173; and J. Mackenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988). For discussion on taxidermy as a 'sign system' within an imperial context of conquest over aboriginal people see: P. Wakeham, *Taxidermic Signs*: *Reconstructing Aboriginality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
[9] J. Ryan, '"Hunting with the Camera": Photography, Wildlife and Colonialism in Africa', in C. Philo and C. Wilbert (Eds.), *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.209.
[10] G. Marvin, 'Perpetuating Polar Bears: The Cultural Life of Dead Animals', in B. Snæbjörnsdóttir and M. Wilson (Eds.), *Nanoq: Flat out and Bluesome, A Cultural Life of Polar Bears* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006), p.157-65.

preserved, rather they are cultural objects created through craft.'[11] In her pioneering article, Haraway described such creatures as 'frozen' within museum displays.[12] She concluded that taxidermy at the American Museum of Natural History 'was a practice to produce permanence.' Often, then, the taxidermy animal is presented as an object stilled and utterly controlled by human culture.

Whilst recognising that humans asserted dominance over the animal through taxidermy, this article contends that no object containing animal remains – organic dead matter – however constructed it might be, is ever inert. Integral to this argument is an awareness that the museum was not a fixed and inactive ending. While museums sometimes aimed for staticity in their creation of displays, animal matter could never be entirely stilled.[13] Late nineteenth century museums, and their animal specimens, were places of constant movement; they were still lively, even though their inhabitants might be dead. Light damage, insect life and fungal growth could creep in and around specimens. Rot could emanate from within a creature; feathers and fur could fall out. In Bristol Museum, taxidermy travelled around the building. Changing human interpretations meant that the animal was constantly being reassessed by the curator, and sometimes remounted by the taxidermist. Even the creatures that gathered dust were altered – dusty skins became materially different; they were not simply a symptom of inaction.

[11] Marvin, 'Enlivened through Memory', 211.
[12] Haraway, 'Teddy Bear Patriarchy', 25. This is still a common theme in recent scholarship; Helen Gregory and Anthony Purdy describe taxidermy displays as 'preoccupied with freezing time and space.' H. Gregory and A. Purdy, 'Present Signs, Dead Things: Indexical Authenticity and Taxidermy's Nonabsent Animal', *Configurations*, 23 (2015), 66.
[13] Samuel Alberti's *The Afterlives of Animals* does recognise that the museum was a changeable landscape: specimens could be 'embellished, reconfigured in new and interesting ways.' However, the focus remains on changing interpretations, not corporeal restoration. Alberti, 'Introduction: The Dead Ark', *The Afterlives of Animals*, p.7. For scholarship on the dynamic processes of decay see: C. DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017) and J. Lorimer, 'Rot', *Environmental Humanities*, 8 (2016) 235-39.

This discussion of dynamism is not to dismiss the violence and cruelty of animals' treatment at human hands. Rather, the aim it is to note that the animal skin was the locus of material changes, and, crucially, it was also the interface between the taxidermy creature, the taxidermist, and the curator – between the animal object and the human body. This focus develops the animal historian Erica Fudge's claim that creaturely interpretations must be linked to the physical animal:

> It is in the use – in the material relation with the animals – that representations must be grounded. Concentration on pure representation (if such a thing were possible) would miss this, and it is the job – perhaps even the duty – of the historian of animals to understand and analyze the uses to which animals were put.[14]

This essay derives most of its inspiration from authors who have addressed the strange materiality of taxidermy. Rachel Poliquin has written, in *The Breathless Zoo,* about the human longing for taxidermy. She describes how much of the attraction lies in the creature's residual animality: 'the eyes may be glass, but the animal stares back.'[15] The geographer Merle Patchett has explored the embodied, multi-species processes behind taxidermy – for instance those involved in tracking, killing, and mounting a tiger in colonial India.[16] The animal historian Karen Jones draws on Patchett in her exploration of Percy Powell Cotton's big game collection, his museum in Kent, and its tangible 'necrogeographies' of pursuit, production and performance.[17]

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[14] E. Fudge, 'A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals', in N. Rothfels (Ed.), *Representing Animals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), p.7.

[15] R. Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), p.15. Jane Desmond argues that 'soft tissue – eyes, nostrils, tongues – can be glass, wax, plastic, but only the actual skin of the animal will do.' J. Desmond, 'Displaying Death, Animating Life: Changing Fictions of "Liveness" from Taxidermy to Animatronics', in Rothfels' (Ed.), *Representing Animals*, p.161. See also: G. Aloi, *Speculative Taxidermy*: *Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

[16] M. Patchett, 'Tracking Tigers: Recovering the Embodied Practices of Taxidermy', *Historical Geography*, 36, (2008), 17-39. See also: M. Patchett, K. Foster and H. Lorimer, 'The Biogeographies of a Hollow-Eyed Harrier', in Alberti (Ed.), *The Afterlives of Animals*, p.110-133; and M. Patchett, 'Taxidermy Workshops: Differently Figuring the Working of Bodies and Bodies at Work in the Past', *Transactions*, 42 (2017), 390-404.

[17] K. Jones, 'The Rhinoceros and the Chatham Railway: Taxidermy and the Production of Animal Presence in the 'Great Indoors'', *History*, 101 (2016), 710-35.

Liv Emma Thorsen, a historian of museology, provides a wide-ranging analysis of 'animal matter' in museums. 'Dog-skin caps, taxidermied animals, cutlery, upholstered pets, fragments of exotic animals – all are glimpses of singular elements in a vast multitude of objects made from animal materials.'[18] She also suggests that bits of these specimens can be dismantled, reused and renarrativised. Ann Colley has explored the myriad (living and dead) uses of wild animal skins in Victorian Britain and suggests that collecting was more a process of chaos than of imperial order. She briefly details the precarity of skins sent to Britain from overseas, as so many specimens were consumed by insects on the voyage.[19]

These sorts of ideas – of the uncanny animality of the mount and skin, and of its material and embodied production processes – shall be developed afresh in this essay. I will take you inside the turn of the twentieth century Bristol Museum to discover that this was not a place of inertia and stillness. By exploring curatorship, and the ongoing processes of taxidermy, care, and reassembly, the animal skin shall be revaluated as a meeting place between the human body and animal remains. Museum histories and writings emphasise the evolving nature of curatorship.[20] And yet the role of the museum curator has mostly been overlooked in taxidermy scholarship, particularly in relation to their physical contact with the specimen.[21] Whilst the curator's interactions with the dead animal were less hands-on than the

[18] L. E. Thorsen, 'Animal Matter in Museums' in H. Kean and P. Howell (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Animal-Human History* (London: Routledge, 2018), p.185.
[19] A. Colley, *Wild Animal Skins in Victorian Britain: Zoos, Collections, Portraits, and Maps* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p.70-4.
[20] For scholarship on the curator, see : P. Schorch and C. McCarthy (Eds.), *Curatopia*: *Museums and the Future of Curatorship* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); S. Dudley, *Museum Materialities*: *Objects, Engagements, Interpretations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); V. Golding, W. Modest (Eds.), *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration* (London: Berg Publishers, 2013).
[21] Scholars have looked at natural history curation and changing trends in science and display, for example: K. Rader and V. Cain, *Life on Display*: *Revolutionizing U.S. Museums of Science and & Natural History in the Twentieth Century* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2014). Essays in *Afterlives of Animals* mention curation, and Alberti explains that 'conservators, taxidermists and curators labored on specimens.' However, there is little on embodied contact between the animal mount and curator: Alberti, 'Introduction', *Afterlives of Animals*, p.7; S. Everest, "Under the Skin:" The Biography of a Manchester Mandrill', *Afterlives of Animals*, p.73-91. For a slight exception, in that it considers some curatorship techniques, and the modern use of flesh-eating beetles to clean bones, see: Asma, *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads.*

taxidermist's, they were nevertheless imbued with tactility – curators dusted, washed, brushed, moved, and removed animal remains. They revisited the animal specimen time and again.

The early twentieth century saw a striking change for the taxidermy in the Bristol Museum. New curatorship trends, novel taxidermy techniques, and national and global thinking in science and natural history, converged within the animal specimen. Focussing on this period of upheaval and renewal, between 1898 and 1914, Bristol Museum acts as a window onto the wider developments in the study and display of the natural world. This discussion will also home in on small but significant skin stories. It will return to the new lion display – and to the story of Hannibal in particular – to explore the effects of curator on lion, and of dead lion on curator.

Studies of the past are so often focused on the visual. To address this, there has been a movement towards multi-sensory histories in recent decades, with studies of sound growing in popularity. Others are turning to touch – and how humans have experienced and felt the world around them.[22] However, the cultural historian Constance Classen argues that there is still a paucity of historical writing on touch: 'touch lies at the heart of our experience of ourselves and the world yet it often remains unspoken of and, even more so, unhistoricized.'[23] Touch is often bound to the skin. In the 1980s, the philosopher Michel Serres argued that the (human) skin is a 'milieu', a meeting place through which we

[22] J. Mansell, *The Age of Noise in Britain*: *Hearing Modernity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); P. Coates, 'The Strange Stillness of the Past: Toward an Environmental History of Sound and Noise', *Environmental History*, 10 (2005), 636-65; C. Classen, *The Book of Touch* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).
[23] C. Classen, 'The Inside Story', *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), p.xii.

experience the surrounding world.[24] Skin was considered by the philosopher and psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu as an expression of the human self – Anzieu described the 'skin ego.'[25] In recent decades, scholarship on touch, and on the uses and meanings of skin, has turned to bodily matter; this corporeal focus draws on scholarship on embodiment and the history of the body. These are areas that have developed with and alongside the rise of new materialism.[26] Nevertheless, these authors write only of the human skin. Through taxidermy, animals *became* a skin. When touching an animal, we have always felt their skin through our own skin. The taxidermy specimen is a valuable site for examining tactile, historical contact between animal remains and the human body. The animal skin was both a medium, and the flexible matter from which the taxidermist and curator shaped their creatures.

ANIMAL PRINT

Skins were sent to British museums from far-flung places. Bristol was a trading city characterised by inward and outward flows. In 1901, the *Western Daily Press* predicted that Bristol Museum 'might even become a sort of epitome of our vast empire by exhibiting the peculiar productions of our chief dependencies.'[27] This suggests that the museum aimed to become a microcosm of the global connectivity between Bristol, Britain, empire, and their

[24] See for instance: M. Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008).
[25] D. Anzieu, *The Skin-Ego* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
[26] See: J. E. H. Smith (Ed.), *Embodiment: A History* (New York, NY : Oxford University Press, 2017); Z. Maalej and N. Yu (Eds*.), Embodiment via Body Parts: Studies from Various Languages and Cultures* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub. Co., 2011). The new materialist foundation for this turn towards things bodily and physical includes: S. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*: *A Political Ecology of Things* (London: Duke University Press, 2010); K. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*: *Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (London: Duke University Press, 2007). For scholarship on the human skin see: C. Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); S. Connor, *The Book of Skin* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Classen, *The Book of Touch;* A. Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).
[27] 'The Bristol Museum', *Western Daily Press,* 3 May. 1901, 5.

myriad environments. The museum displayed animal bodies in a central location; perched at the top of Park Street, Bristol's main shopping street.

Before the mount could be put on display and looked at, however, the animal skin had to be claimed. The recently dead skin was prised away from the carcass. In colonial environments, the British hunter would employ local and indigenous people within the hunting party.[28] Often, theirs were the skilled hands that located and flayed animal bodies; human fingers, and a small, sharpened scalpel, made the best tools for the job.[29] Most hunted specimens were therefore the product of an (unequal) network of human labour. The dead animal body was transformed and conveyed by shikaris, grooms, and porters, long before it reached the British taxidermist or museum. The fatty underlayer had to be removed from the skin, the animal would no longer need its insulatory protection, and, in time, fugitive fat deposits could cause mounted skins to rot or to burst open, leaving yellow wounds.[30]

To temper this, the animal hide would be preserved with a cocktail of chemicals and poisons. Arsenical soap (its solid form allowing for easy transportation) was popularised in the early nineteenth century, following the experiments of its inventor, the ornithologist Jean-Baptiste Bécœur.[31] However, well into the twentieth century, hunters and taxidermists recommended an odd assortment of preservatives and insecticides.[32] These applications were supposed to

[28] See, for example: Storey, 'Big Cats and Imperialism', 135-173. This relationship reflected wider imperial power dynamics. The diaries of hunters often reveal extreme racism and prejudice, and a callous indifference to the lives of the local people they employed. See: W. Campbell, *The Old Forest Ranger, or Wild Sports of India on the Neilgherry Hills, in the Jungles and on the Plains* (London: How and Parsons, 1842), p.159; C. Peel, *Somaliland* (Bloomsbury: London, 1900), p.130.
[29] See: W. B Tegetmeier, 'A Lesson in Bird Skinning', *The Field.* 25 July. 1868, 75.
[30] J. A. Dickinson, 'Taxidermy' in M. Kite (Ed.), *Conservation of Leather and Related Materials* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.134; Ward, *Sportsman's Handbook*, p.26.
[31] The British taxidermist William Swainson described how arsenic soap was 'more adapted for travellers' due to its 'less fluid state.' W. Swainson, *Taxidermy: with the Biographies of Zoologists* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1840), p.28. Towards the end of the nineteenth century there was a movement away from arsenic, as it was considered ineffective and highly dangerous; it easily crept under human skin.
[32] Alum, carbolic acid, naphthalene, turpentine, corrosive sublimate (aka mercury chloride), and various salts were popular. Others recommended suspending skins in spirits or pickles. The famed taxidermist Rowland Ward produced his own recipe, known as 'taxidermine.' See: Ward, *The Sportsman's Handbook,* p.24.

still the decay process and render the skin stable. The objective was to freeze animal skin in a state prior to decomposition – in early death. However, as this essay will explore, the death process could often only be slowed. Through skinning, the animal had begun its journey from alive to (potentially) lively seeming within the museum. The skin, removed from the volatile carcass, became a stand-in for the entire creature. Skins were carried by a workforce of living animals: camels, horses, oxen, mules, and elephants. They often covered great distances by ship and by train, before arriving at their intended museums. As well as the Brazenor Bros', Bristol Museum also participated in an exchange of animal bodies with the world-renowned Rowland Ward's taxidermy company, based in Piccadilly in central London and known colloquially as 'the Jungle.'[33] Curators and taxidermists did not, generally, kill animals – they were not directly complicit in animal deaths. And yet they built up entire livelihoods around their deadness.

Many of the animals encountered in this article – many of these skins – no longer have a physical presence.[34] Like all historians writing about animals, this leaves me in a difficult position. As Fudge has underscored, the animal can never write its own history, or leave us sources to suggest what such a history should look like.[35] We try to piece back together the stories of these taxidermy creatures through descriptions and records – we are reliant on the human voice and the animal trace. In lieu of the skin I have a sheaf of fast-yellowing pages – in this case annual reports, newspaper articles, and the rich collection of documents housed in Bristol Museum's archive. And yet, my material focus came-about precisely because these corporeal changes are so apparent in the archive. Fudge explains that the 'the inevitable centrality of the human in the history of animals—the reliance upon documents created by humans—need not be regarded as a failing, because if a history of animals is to be distinctive

[33] See for instance: *Annual Report* (1902), 16.
[34] Some of these specimens do still reside in the museum, but others have moved on, or been lost.
[35] Fudge, 'Left-Handed Blow', 11.

it must offer us what we might call an "interspecies competence.''[36] The importance of these animal skins— the disruption and the changes associated with them – compelled the human to write and record. The material skin might be gone, but its influence remains palpable.

Taxidermy was defined by this inclusion of skin. The term 'taxidermy' has its origins in the Greek *taxis*, meaning order or arrangement, and *derma*, meaning skin. Animal skin was the only constant in the nineteenth and early twentieth century taxidermy process: technique, materials and curatorship were dynamic and changeable. So was the sourcing of skins. Specimens were sometimes hunted in far-off lands, and then gifted or purchased from hunters and animal collectors. Many animals were killed to *become* taxidermy – whilst their bodies were presented to look lively, they were always a product of death.

Bristol Museum was a meeting place for these well-travelled remains, and the local wildlife from the south-west of England, animals like badgers, red deer, and pheasants.[37] These animals mingled with the captive specimens donated by zoos and menageries. In 1904, Bristol Zoo Gardens donated a tiger skin, one of the many animals which made the journey from cage to museum case. This skin was sent on to Rowland Ward's, before it was placed on display in the museum. The annual report described:

> The skin of a well-known tiger, Rajah, presented to the Gardens in 1896 by the Maharana of Odeypore, India. Rajah has long been famous for his magnificent proportions and beautiful markings, so that the gift of such a specimen is a very valuable accession. The taxidermists (Messrs. Rowland Ward, Ltd.) gave special attention to the modelling and pose of the animal, and as now set up with suitable surroundings it is a specimen of which any museum might well be proud.[38]

[36] Fudge, 'Left-Handed Blow', 11.
[37] In 1913 the museum constructed a pheasant diorama, with Bristol's iconic suspension bridge depicted in the distance. *Annual Report* (1913), 11-12.
[38] *Annual Report* (1906), 19. For more on Rajah see: 'The Bristol Museum', *Western Daily Press*, March 28. 1904, 9. For discussion on the entangled animal-human relationships within Bristol Zoo see: A. Flack, *The Wild Within*: *Histories of a Landmark British Zoo* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2018).

Most animals were positioned as representatives of their species within museums, they stood in for the collective animal body.[39] Zoos, hunters, and menageries sought the most impressive animals in stature and colouration, animals with Rajah's 'magnificent proportions.' They carefully selected body size, as big animals meant big skins. The museum specimen could therefore misrepresent the natural diversity of animals in the wild. For hairy mammals, like Rajah, fur formed the visible extremity of the skin. Although a zoo resident, Rajah came originally from India, and his furry skin – burning orange, intercut with black – was materially tied to both Bristol and to colonial India. To some extent, Rajah was a malleable object; his skin was 'valuable', monetarily, because of its associations with Indian royalty and colonial power structures, and due to its scale and beauty. He was a vision of empire condensed into tiger form. As Poliquin argues: 'all taxidermy is a choreographed spectacle.'[40]

And yet, Rajah's value stemmed from his skin's physical animality, its fleshliness. His skin was something un-creatable by humans. Rajah was reproduced by Ward as a complete tiger, and the size and proportions of his skin dictated the shape of his taxidermy mount. The thickenings and the contours of his skin determined where the skinner cut, and the taxidermist stitched. Human hand and animal skin shaped the taxidermy process. The language used in the reports reveals the curators' dedication to his reproduction: they remarked that he was crafted ('modelled' and 'posed') by Ward's company with 'special attention', and suggested they were 'proud' of their new big cat specimen.[41]

The animal would neither be present, nor have presence, without its skin. Human skin is a manifestation of personality and, as the anthropologist Nina Jablonski explains, a 'vehicle for

[39] See: H. Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Poliquin 'The Matter and Meaning of Museum Taxidermy', 123-134.
[40] Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo,* p.103, 95.
[41] *Annual Report* (1906), 19.

self-expression.'[42] The physical skin is inextricably linked to ideas on race, and similarity and difference. We use it both to assign societal groupings and express identity and individuality, through piercings, tattoos, and cosmetic surgery. When we visualise a human being, we see their skin; the literary critic Abbie Garrington describes it as the 'most conspicuous' representation of the body.[43] Non-human animals, too, depend on their skins as identifiers of species, sex, age and health. In vertebrates, skin is frequently unique to the individual creature, it helps a creature to stand out, or to blend in. A leopard's spots are its own discrete pattern, akin to the human fingerprint. The skin can demarcate or blur species boundaries, for instance, only a minor difference in banding distinguishes some milk snakes from the highly venomous coral snakes of North America. By mimicking the coral snake, the milk snake is made less vulnerable as it is less likely to be eaten. Skin is a protector.

Skin is the physical boundary between organisms and the wider environment: between the outside, and our insides. Jablonski describes it as a 'selectively permeable sheath.'[44] It is the largest organ in the animal body; a flaking layer of epidermis cloaking the structural, collagen-strengthened, dermis. In taxidermy, the skin was more than just a hide. It also encompassed the skin structures such as the claws, hoofs, horns, fur, and feathers – the bits of keratin akin to, produced by, and rooted within, the skin. As skin coverings, which acted as an outer skin, feathers and fur will be considered as synonymous with the skin. The process of skinning revealed the internal uniformity of all animals, as without it everything was simply meat. In the museum, the skin was also what separated the animal specimen from the constructed animal model. Humans selected, manipulated, and shaped Rajah's skin as he was

[42] Skin is easily modified, and it is also pervasive in the English language – things 'get under our skin', unless we are 'thick skinned.' N. Jablonski, *Skin: A Natural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. xii, 4, 149.
[43] Garrington, *Haptic Modernism*, p.16.
[44] Jablonski, *Skin*, p.1.

taxidermied and curated, and yet, his skin also shaped the idea of the tiger that humans attempted to recreate.

Five years earlier, Bristol's public were presented with a dead mandrill. They might have encountered this particular primate before, as, when alive, he was displayed in Barnum and Bailey's famous travelling circus. In 1899, the *Western Daily Press* described the museum's new celebrity inhabitant:

> In view of the approaching visit to Bristol of Messrs Barnum and Bailey's greatest show on earth, patrons of the Museum in Queen's Road will find interest in a specimen of the mandrill which was included in the show at its previous visit, and died at Southampton, its skin being sent by the proprietors to the Museum. The skin has been treated with great skill by Messrs Brazenor Bros., and the result is a fine example of taxidermy. The colouring of the face is extremely well preserved, and with the natural position tends towards giving an almost lifelike appearance.[45]

In life, this mandrill toured the US and Europe with the circus, its living body a site of entertainment and intrigue. In death, its simian skin was sent from Southampton to Bristol, and then on to Brazenor Bros in Brighton, before, put-back-together-again, the dead monkey returned to Bristol. We are offered a glimpse of the steady flow of living and dead animal bodies and bits that criss-crossed the late Victorian world. The roles of both the human taxidermist, and the dead animal, are emphasised within this description. The skin had been 'treated with great skill' by Brazenor. The result was a 'fine example of taxidermy', rather than a fine example of mandrill. All taxidermy is dependent on this strange interplay between human skill and interpretation and the organic qualities of skin. There are suggestions of craft – of human artistry – but also of preservation, of retention and persistence.

The author of the article (and presumably both Brazenor Bros and Bristol Museum) believed that this animal body had been positioned and placed in such a way as to successfully represent a living mandrill's natural reality. The article suggests that the colouring of the face

[45] 'The Bristol Museum', *Western Daily Press*, April 22. 1899, 3.

was particularly well preserved: it had been safeguarded from becoming dull and dead and lifeless. However, this colouration – the vivid pinks and blues of the male mandrill face – were produced not by the monkey, but by the taxidermist.[46] The colours could no longer emanate from within the animal as such pigmentation fades shortly after death and dismemberment. The skin as an organ had been cut off; it was no longer fed by a tangle of blood vessels. The vibrant hues came, instead, from the dab of the paintbrush, the primate face made 'almost lifelike' by the artistic touch of the human hand. Dead animal skin defied human manufacture yet it could be enhanced or marred by human touch.

The materiality of the skins of Rajah the tiger, and the technicoloured mandrill, were essential to their becoming taxidermy. Animality was embedded and embodied in these skins. However, to look completely animal, skins needed a skilled human hand to provide the contours and colourations of the animal mount. Through these examples, we get a sense of the intimate and tactile relationship between the taxidermist and the animal skin; of how they influenced one another. But there was another author of the taxidermy creature. This was the curator. These were the people who selected and accepted skins. The museum's reports suggest, repeatedly, that curators took on custodianship of the animal after they 'had passed through the hands of the taxidermist.'[47] They also made suggestions to taxidermists about *how* an animal should be posed. It was the curators who displayed the taxidermy animal – theirs were the human bodies who returned to the dead creature time and time again – to clean, to rearrange, to remove.

[46] 'The Bristol Museum', April 22, 1899, 3. For more on specimen colouration see: Ward, *Sportsman's Handbook*, p.13.
[47] *Annual Report* (1900), 6.

The roles of skin, and of curators and taxidermists, were not fixed, and the museum constituted a changeable landscape. In comparison to other British museums, Bristol Museum was late to open its animal (and other) inhabitants completely to the public gaze. Between 1872 and 1893, visitors had to ring a bell and buy a ticket to enter the museum.[48] One disgruntled Bristolian, under the alias of 'a student', wrote to the *Bristol Mercury* in 1892 complaining about this inaccessibility. They described how rather than allowing the public to 'read from Nature's own book its fascinating story', the museum was 'almost impossible for us to use with anything like the freedom that is necessary to real educational advantage.'[49]

If visitors managed to get inside, they would find an ordered gathering of animal objects: a queue rather than a throng.[50] It was the curators who chose the stories to tell with their animal specimens. Bristol Museum's mid-late nineteenth century displays had a specific aim, one which reflected wider trends in museum display. The museum reported in 1875 that the animal collection is 'constantly becoming more complete.'[51] The curator hoarded animal bodies to demonstrate the comprehensive natural world through the medium of the taxidermy creature. Nationally, mid-late nineteenth century displays prioritised the animal collective, and the relationships between, and the divergences of, different species.[52]

Linnaean classification created borders and boundaries and made it natural that Hannibal the lion be grouped close to other animals in the *Felidae* family.[53] Hannibal had been a famous occupant of Bristol Zoo. He was already well known before he arrived in Bristol, as a

[48] In 1872 museum entry cost 6d., except on Mondays and Saturdays when it was reduced to 2d. W. Barker, *The Bristol Museum and Art Gallery: The Development of the Institution during a Hundred and Thirty-Four Years, 1772-1906* (Bristol: 1906), p.36.
[49] 'Letters to the Editor', *Bristol Mercury*, 22 March. 1892, 3.
[50] *Annual Report* (1872), 5-6.
[51] *Annual Report* (1875), 13.
[52] For more on classification and display see: Ritvo, *Platypus and the Mermaid.*
[53] E. Wilson, *Guide to Bristol Museum* (Bristol: 1891), Bristol Museum Archive, Fine Art, p.4.

resident of Wombwell's travelling menagerie. He was famed for having a large, muscular frame, making him a prime example of a lion. After his death at the zoo, his mount was first displayed in the museum in 1878.[54] By 1891, his dead companions included 'the Tiger, the Leopard, the Ocelot, the Lynx and Puma.' But Hannibal was also near to 'the Wolf and the Fox, the Mongoose, Polecat and Weasel' as these were all digitigrades – creatures that walked on their toes – and their bodies could be sized up for comparison.[55] These taxonomic ties, both close and loosely bound, were showcased through the animal body. They were also reproduced through paper and illustration; the curators decked the walls with 'tables of zoological and geological classification.'[56]

The museum was short of funds.[57] This was also the period before the increased specialisation of museum roles and the simultaneous reliance on external taxidermy companies. It was Mr Crocker, the assistant curator – and resident natural history specialist – who first taxidermied Hannibal the lion.[58] When Hannibal died at the zoo (whilst we do not know his exact age, he was described by the *Bristol Mercury* as an 'exceedingly old' cat), he was quickly stuffed.[59] His insides would have been made from cotton, tow, or straw, literally stuffed inside a metal frame. Filled skins were then massaged into animal shape by human hands. The stuffed body's topography was fabricated muscle and flesh, lumps and bumps of moulded skin and stuff. As Hannibal died an old lion, Mr Crocker smoothed out his puckered skin, transforming him into a younger creature, and a better representative of an archetypal

[54] *Annual Report* (1879), 13.
[55] Wilson, *Guide to Bristol Museum*, p.4.
[56] *Annual Report* (1872), 6-7.
[57] *Annual Reports* (1888 and 1891), 9, 6.
[58] 'Local News', *Bristol Mercury.* 31 May. 1878, 5.
[59] 'The Talk of Bristol', 1 April. 1899, 4.

lion – more like an animal in the prime of his life.[60] This was skin-to-skin contact between living body and disembodied skin.

But, like the changeable taxidermy specimen, technique and curatorship did not stand still. At the end of the nineteenth century the museum enjoyed an upturn in its fortunes, when, in 1893, the former Mayor of Bristol Charles Wathen donated £3000. The museum paid off its debts and applied for public status under the 1891 Museums and Gymnasiums Act.[61] In 1894 it was successfully transferred to the city. A period of renovation and extension began, and electric lighting was introduced. A new natural history curator, Herbert Bolton, who had experience within the Manchester Museum, was appointed.[62] The museum committee explained that they hired Bolton for his 'scientific training' and his 'experience in museum management.'[63]

Under Bolton, the holey, the ugly and the lumpy were unacceptable.[64] In 1898, the museum described that 'a clearance of imperfect specimens of birds has now been effected.'[65] Two 'dilapidated' sheds were removed and replaced with workshops for the curator and his assistants.[66] In these spaces, specimens were reworked: 'Many specimens were drawn from the store collection and re-mounted, and others have been obtained. The additions from these sources have been considerable, and wherever re-mounting has taken place, the best taxidermists have been entrusted with the work.'[67] Bolton tapped into the supply of

[60] 'The Talk of Bristol', 1 April. 1899, 4. Whilst it is possible that staff wore gloves, they are never mentioned in the museum's literature. Many Victorian taxidermists obtained hand injuries when preserving creatures with arsenic. See for instance: E. Coues, *Handbook of field and general ornithology: a manual of the structure and classification of birds (*London: Macmillan & Co, 1890), p.40.
[61] *Annual Report* (1894) 3-5.
[62] The *Bristol Mercury* described him as 'go-ahead': 'The Talk of Bristol', 5 August. 1899, 3. See also: *Annual Report* (1898), 6-7.
[63] *Annual Report* (1898), 6.
[64] 'The Talk of Bristol', 1 April. 1899, 4.
[65] *Annual Report* (1898), 8.
[66] *Annual Report* (1898), 7.
[67] *Annual Report* (1905), 16.

specimens (study skins and taxidermy) kept out of public view – the animal reserves, stowed away in the spaces underneath the museum.

As the Victorian museum prioritised quantity, and hunting was more prolific than ever by the turn of the century, stores were quickly filled with additional specimens. The museum historian Steven Conn describes such places as 'alternative museums' and 'a parallel museum universe.'[68] Under Bolton, these bodies were unravelled and taken back to their raw animal ingredients. We can envisage the human body, teasing and pulling, working to unstitch the animal. It was the skin that remained the interface with the world. These un-made skins were then sent off to selected taxidermists. Bolton was considered ambitious, the *Bristol Mercury* noted that 'the curator, Mr Bolton, is anxious to continue this improvement until the museum shall rank second to none in the provinces.'[69]

Remounting demonstrates that, to argue that skin remained constant to taxidermy, is not to say that museum skins were made stable. Neither is it to say that, after the initial mounting, they went untouched by human hand. The skin was where the curator met the animal, something which is further highlighted in the case of Hannibal and the other zoo lions. In 1899, Bolton cleaned the lions, had them remounted, and placed them together in a new display as a dead pride. This renovation was paid for by the mayor of Bristol, Herbert Ashman, and cost him £60.[70] In the annual report for 1900, the museum described:

> The second new case has also been completed and is occupied by two realistic groups of Lions, which have also attracted much attention, and the Committee have the satisfaction of knowing that by dealing with valuable specimens in a through manner they have really saved the skins from destruction, as extensive injury had already been done.[71]

[68] S. Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p.23.
[69] 'The Talk of Bristol', 28 August. 1899.
[70] 'The Talk of Bristol', 1 April 1899. 12.
[71] *Annual Report* (1900), 6.

These lions were being eaten. Moths were feeding on their fur, causing hair to 'slip' and fall out. These skins were an ecosystem in miniature, a furry living landscape. They had also amassed a second skin of dust. The inclusion of skin was the thing that made the lion mount look obviously like an animal. The organic nature of these skins attracted insects; as animal remains, taxidermy is always volatile. Insect 'pests', such as the clothes moth (*Tineola Bisselliella)* and the 'bacon' beetle (*Dermestes Lardarius*), can often be found nibbling their way through museum collections.[72] The former preys on fur, the latter on dried flesh. Paradoxically, then, a skin's organic materiality can undermine its animal appearance. This is the tension between a specimen simultaneously being animal *because* of skin, whist also having the potential to decay, and to look more dead, because of this animality. A taxidermy lion does not look like a living creature if it is rotten, nibbled or worn. Through this example, the contradictions inherent in taxidermy are at their most striking. The once-living nature of the skin enabled the liveliness of decay to take hold. The museum attempted to remove these visual signs of change; to return the creature to a state of stasis that never was, and never could be.

The museum declared that this deterioration was successfully reversed as the skins were 'saved.' The *Bristol Mercury* reported that the Mayor 'cannot but be satisfied with the way in which his £60 have been expended.'[73] The skins were sanitised, and the dirt was washed away to reveal the original white-yellow of the lions coats.[74] In 'saving' the 'injured' lion skins, the role of the curator (and the museum committee) was medicalised, and the human was positioned as healer and carer to the animal body. The language used suggests alteration and transformation, as well as return and repetition. The cubs were given 'new' glass eye 'organs': simultaneously a novelty, and an echo of the living eye.

[72] See: Ward, *Sportsman's Handbook*, p.19-20.
[73] 'The Talk of Bristol', 1 April. 1899. 4.
[74] 'The Talk of Bristol', 1 April. 1899, 4.

With Hannibal, Bolton went a step further:

> Special attention was paid to Hannibal. At his death he was an exceedingly old animal, had lost most of his teeth, and his skin was covered with wrinkles, but when he was mounted at the Museum all these symptoms of old-age vanished, and his appearance was that of a comparatively young animal. Now, however, he has been mounted more true to life. His face is more drawn in, and the wrinkles show again, so that his appearance is much more natural.[75]

With his remounting, Hannibal the taxidermied lion was reportedly made old again. Skin is a flexible organ that can be levelled, stretched, and distorted when removed from the body. Bolton believed that, in remounting the lion to look old, Hannibal had been returned to his own wrinkled skin. In life, a reduction of proteins in the skin – primarily, a loss of elastin and collagen – produces wrinkles. In death, they were fashioned through the exertion and the vision of the taxidermist. This human interpretation of the animal's aged body was expressed using the skin's plasticity. This is an unusual case: an animal being remounted to look *older*, albeit cleaner and purportedly 'more natural.' Nevertheless, it demonstrates how the animal skin could be a locus for the unexpected. The changeability of Hannibal's skin tells us about the tactile, shifting relationship between dead animal, curator, and taxidermist, a relationship played out through the medium of the skin.

Bristol, and museums across the country, began outsourcing their complex cases, specimens such as Bristol's shabby lions, to taxidermy firms. The taxidermy creature was a thing of trial and error. In the late nineteenth century taxidermists experimented with internal frameworks, rather than stuffing. Rowland Ward was at the forefront of commercial taxidermy in Britain and was instrumental in developing a highly skilled studio with an underlying production line principle.[76] Whilst Ward's company were hands-on, they nevertheless reflected the growing industrialisation of the taxidermy profession. Commercial taxidermists were influenced by

[75] 'The Talk of Bristol', 1 April. 1899, 4; *Annual Report* (1900), 6.
[76] See: R. Ward, *A Naturalist's Life Study in the Art of Taxidermy* (London: Rowland Ward, 1913); P. Morris, *Rowland Ward: Taxidermist to the World* (London: MPM Publishing, 2003).

the changing pace of British manufacturing in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a development which led to mass produced animal frameworks, and readily available replacement parts.[77] Nevertheless, Ward remained focussed on intricate detail; Bristol Museum commented on the realistic 'presence' and 'scientific accuracy' of their Wardian bird specimens:

> All were constructed by Messrs. Rowland Ward, Ltd., who made a special effort to produce results of a pleasing character and distinguished by scientific accuracy. The presence of these group cases has had a marked effect upon visitors to the Museum, who examine them with considerable interest, and not unfrequently discuss their special features.[78]

Iron rods were shaped as legs, tail and head, and covered with a soft, pliable wood; Ward described the iron rod as 'the marrow' within the wooden 'bone.'[79] Over this wood, clay was moulded (by human hand) into muscles and tendons. This was covered with the skin. Stitching had to be barely perceptible to disguise human involvement; seams and sutures should snake cross the inside of limbs, hidden from public view. So that mucus membranes did not appear matte, they were swathed with molten wax, which Ward described as promoting 'the naturalness of the appearance most materially.'[80] From the end of the nineteenth century, lighter, paper and plaster interiors were introduced, as influenced by American museum taxidermists. A 'manikin' papier-mache production system was pioneered by US naturalist William Hornaday. *Scientific Taxidermy for Museums,* a book donated to Bristol Museum by the Smithsonian Institute in 1894, applauded this new technique.[81] There was not one blueprint for the taxidermy creature, these were variable products of skin, bone, wood, clay, papier mache, plaster, glass, paint, iron and wax.

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[77] See: Jones, 'The Rhinoceros and the Chatham Railway', 721-6; M. Patchett, 'Historical Geographies of Apprenticeship: Rethinking and Retracing Craft Conveyance over Time and Place', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 55 (2017), 30-43; Patchett, 'Tracking Tigers', 17-39; Morris, *Rowland Ward: Taxidermist to the World*.
[78] *Annual Report* (1905), 18.
[79] Ward, *Sportsman's Handbook,* p.57.
[80] Ward, *Sportsman's Handbook,* p.59.
[81] R. Shufeldt, *Scientific Taxidermy for Museums* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1894), p.420; *Annual Report* (1894), p.14.

Being taxidermied was not necessarily the end of an animal's cutaneous journey. These museum creatures – encased in glass or placed in storage – were specimens that had been put away, and that we might expect to go untouched. Of course, not all specimens were touched up, and many were discarded. Nevertheless, these animal collections did not contain the stilled bodies so often associated with taxidermy. However, for the visitor, tactile contact was prohibited. Oily fingers and palms could degrade skin and fur. As Classen has suggested, this 'hands-off' approach developed with the popularisation of public museums in Britain in the nineteenth century.[82] Classen suggests there was a class element to the encasement of specimens. Paternalistic middle-class museum committees did not trust the newly admitted working class visitors with open displays. Taxidermy cries out to be touched. The *Bristol Mercury* suggested that they viewed Bristol's children, and in particular the 'street urchins', as the demographic most in need of an education in animal form.[83] These animal encounters were generally limited to the visual realm.

But behind the scenes, taxidermy – and the making, and unmaking of animal specimens – was an ongoing and embodied process. The effect of humans on skins is obvious. Less obvious, perhaps, is the effect of animal skins on humans. Thorsen describes how, for the contemporary museum visitor, such animal objects are 'evocative, talkative, chimerical, knotted, and hybrid because their properties trigger emotions, tickle the curiosity, and invite conversations and discourse.'[84] In the Bristol Museum, these skins drew the curator back to them, pulled by their potential. For Bolton, this pull was partly bound to an idea of naturalness – the perceived level of naturalism attributed to an animal specimen – a nebulous,

[82] C. Classen, 'Museum Manners: The Sensory Life of the Early Museum', *Journal of Social History*, 40 (2007), 895-914.
[83] 'The Talk of Bristol', 29 March. 1894, 8. See: *Museum Report* (1872), 5. See also the reports for 1898 and 1900.
[84] Thorsen, 'Animal Matter in Museums' in Kean and Howell (Eds.), *Animal-Human History*, p.185.

and ever-shifting, objective.[85] The human aimed to do justice to the animal skin through craft; this was a general trend in museum taxidermy at the turn of the twentieth century.[86] In 1899, the *Bristol Mercury* commented on the 'modern improvements in the mounting of specimens' within Bristol Museum, and that 'years ago the object in taxidermy seemed to be to make the animals look as big and ferocious as possible – now the object is to make them appear quite natural.'[87]

Whilst the techniques and displays may have been fresh, many of these skins were elderly remains. These remounted creatures do not entirely correlate with the idea of skilful progress that the museum (mirroring Victorian thinking on the onward march of so-called civilisation) regularly espoused.[88] There were more complicated temporalities at play than simple linearity, including the very tangible recycling of bodily matter. Animal skin caused human bodies to expend a great deal of energy – of muscle power – in maintenance and modification. Humans tried to muster a skins potential, to match its animality, and meet their own ever-changing standards.

In 1899, in a public lecture, Herbert Bolton described the relationship between animal remains, the curator and the taxidermist – and how he judged whether animality had been achieved. This lecture was reported in the *Western Daily Press*:

> A taxidermist must be an artist, and must know how the skin would behave when stripped from the body. Yet the task of a curator had not ended when he had secured a first-class taxidermist; the curator must check him, and not merely from books, but also from nature as well. In this latter connection he had lately been studying the lions in the Zoo – they were poked up for him, and were most obliging animals- (laughter)- and he was pleased to say this:

[85] For instance: *Annual Report* (1902-3), 16.
[86] For instance: Ward, *Sportsman's Handbook,* p.59.
[87] 'The Bristol Museum', *Bristol Mercury,* 26 May. 1899, 6.
[88] Aloi suggests there is a 'metanarrative' in scholarship that taxidermy progressed from unskilled to skilled. However, this narrative is still important, as it is the one espoused by taxidermists – and Bristol Museum. Aloi, *Speculative Taxidermy*, p.44.

> so far their newly-mounted lions had stood the test of comparison remarkably well.'[89]

Bolton recognised that the taxidermist must know the skin inside out. They must know the 'behaviour' of the skin when disembodied, how it would flow and settle. Bolton saw it as his role – the curator's role – to police the taxidermist; to judge 'him' by his animal recreations. The curator must have a comparably comprehensive knowledge of the material animal body. Bolton visited the lions in Bristol Zoo to compare like for like, to study the rippling movements of the living animal, creatures with muscle, and sinew beneath their skins. In doing so, he evaluated the skill of the Brazenor Bros. These living lions were 'poked up' for Bolton by the Zoo workers; they were made to assume animated positions, as there was no use comparing a sleeping lion to a taxidermy lion when the taxidermy was supposed to be filled with vigour. Bolton looked to the living big cats to make sure that Hannibal and friends embodied lion.

BEYOND THE SKIN

But what to do with these refurbished animals? Herbert Bolton had an idea. From 1899, Bolton adopted displays with increasing levels of naturalistic detail. His elaborate dioramas followed 'on lines adopted in the Natural History Museum of New York.'[90] American dioramas were pioneered by Carl Akeley at the Milwaukee Public Museum, and by Frank Chapman (and later, famously, also Akeley) at the American Museum of Natural History.[91] The historian of museums and the environment, Libby Robin, explains that 'as the science of ecology grew, the focus shifted from the ordering and classification of dead specimens to studying the animal's living behaviour... Museums responded by expanding their cabinets to

[89] 'Museums', *Western Daily Press*, 26 May. 1899, 3.
[90] *Annual Report* (1912), 11.
[91] See: Haraway, *Teddy Bear Patriarchy*, 20-64. For more on dioramas see: K. Wonders, 'Habitat Dioramas as Ecological Theatre' *European Review*, 1 (1993), 285- 300.

include a new "environmental" context.'[92] But dioramas were a large undertaking for a museum. Elijah Howarth, of the Weston Park Museum in Sheffield, speaking at the 1913 Museums Association conference in Hull, explained that dioramas were 'too costly', 'too spacious' and required too much 'varied skill' for some provincial British museums.[93]

Nonetheless, Bolton was determined to embrace global trends. To complete a tiger display in 1905, bamboos and grasses were gifted by Kew Gardens to Bristol Museum.[94] The authenticity that the museum yearned for through careful curation reached beyond the skin surface. The animal skin – and the insistence on how 'natural' the refurbished animals were – created a need for a similarly genuine (seeming) place setting. So, Bolton positioned dried Indian bamboo, grown in the royal botanic gardens within London's outer sprawl, to encircle the mounted tiger. Karen Jones suggests that 'if the hunter held command in the field, and the taxidermist in the workshop, it was here, in the exhibition room that the organic power of animal capital came into its own.'[95] I would add the curator to this medley of taxidermic authors. A flow of material connected Bristol Museum with other hubs, in London and around the globe. Bolton actively participated in these networks, journeying to the museums of Australia and the US in 1913 to gather specimens, and learn production techniques.[96] The same year, he chose the local artist G.E Butler, who had a 'practical knowledge' of South Africa, to paint the background of Bristol Museum's springbok display.[97] Butler created a 'kopjie', a small South African hill, out of memory, paint, and the strokes of the brush.

[92] L. Robin, 'Dead Museum Animals', *reCollections*, 4 (2009) https://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol_4_no_2/papers/dead_museum_animals (accessed 14/06/2020)
[93] E. Howarth, 'Museums Association, Hull Conference 1913, Presidential Address', *Museums Journal*, 13 (1913), 37. Early British dioramas included Rowland Ward's scenes at the Powell-Cotton museum.
[94] *Annual Report* (1905-6), 20.
[95] Jones, 'The Rhinoceros', 733.
[96] *Annual Report* (1914), 6.
[97] *Annual Report* (1914), 12.

The lion pride was one of the earliest dioramas created at Bristol Museum. A description of Hannibal's lion group in the *Bristol Mercury,* deriving from an interview with Bolton, used the term 'real' three times and 'unusually natural' once:

> They have been grouped together in a large case, amongst real African scenery, so that the public may know, not only what a real lion looks like, but how and in what country it lives. A very fine boulder of imitation rock has been introduced, and the floor of the case is studded with real South African grasses. Altogether, the whole group is a magnificent specimen of the taxidermists' art; in fact, in the curator's opinion, there is not a finer group of its kind in Europe, the pose of the animals being so unusually natural.[98]

The display reproduced the harmonious and fertile Africa of the popular imagination. It presented a vision of imperial nature as verdant and devoid of human life, in a period when the British were consolidating their control in South Africa. However, as Bristol's public might well have remembered, this was not Hannibal's, or the other lions, lived experience. Hannibal's reality had been the travelling menagerie and the urban zoo – he was a lion of the cage not the luxuriant savannah. Bolton framed Hannibal's skin both as an individual – as a wrinkled, captive, celebrity – and as a generic lion of an idealised African wilderness. The animal body could be the locus of many different stories. But these were not abstract tales. These narratives were the labour of the curator, grounded in matter, told through the folds of a skin, and fronds of dried grasses. We could see this as the curator imposing control over the animal body. However, there is also a sense of the intensive activity of the human body, striving to construct a display worthy of the taxidermy specimen – painting, picking, arranging, weaving, blending and sculpting – to augment the organic vitality of the animal remains.

[98] 'The Talk of Bristol', 1 April. 1899, 4.

In 1913, three dioramas were lit by concealed lamps and 'visitors can bring the lights into action by pushing a button.'[99] The dead animal body was rendered somewhat interactive, visible even when natural light failed, at the touch of a button. In 1906, Wilberforce Ross Barker, the museum chairman, described how Bolton's new measures were of critical importance to the people of Bristol. As he put it, 'the effort recognises the fact that we shall never succeed in infusing into the minds of those who have it not a love of Nature until we get as near as possible to Nature herself.'[100] The museum wanted to bring nature within touching distance – provided the natural objects remained behind a glass case.

This period, between 1898 and 1914, was a time of rapid change for Bristol Museum. The First World War, and an associated lack of funds, slowed down the creation of new displays and the remounting and acquisition of new specimens.[101] So, too, did the rise of the conservation movement. Desperately needed trade rulings such as the 'London Convention' of 1933, which sought to conserve big game species, restricted hunting in the colonies.[102] Nevertheless, there is value in recognising that, whilst museums could experience different rates and rhythms and speeds, they were never stilled. They are always entangled environments and places of shifts and realignments; places in which a dead animal skin might grow old or be returned to.

A 'fine' male lion, known as Prince – another former resident of Bristol Zoo – replaced 'the much older' Hannibal in 1906.[103] Hannibal was transferred to the museum in Weston Super Mare, just 23 miles down the road from Bristol.[104] By this point his remains were older still, reflecting the fading glamour of his new seaside home. In 1947, the *Sunday Express* ran an

[99] *Annual Report* (1913), 12.
[100] Barker, *The Bristol Museum and Art Gallery*, 55.
[101] *Annual Report* (1918), 3, 5.
[102] H. Suich, B. Child and A. Spenceley 'Introduction' in Suich, Child and Spenceley (Eds.), *Evolution and Innovation in Wildlife Conservation* (London: Earthscan, 2009), p.6.
[103] *Annual Report* (1906), 17.
[104] 'Hannibal' papers, Bristol Museum Natural History Archive.

advert for Hannibal, under the heading 'LION WANTS A HOME.'[105] Many people (including children) applied for him, and he was eventually transferred from Weston to Surrey to become the mascot of an engineering firm. He has since vanished. In Bristol, in November 1940, the Second World War came directly to the museum when a bomb hit the natural history building. The roof caved inwards, the curator's room was burnt out, and the museum reported the loss of hundreds of taxidermy specimens.[106] Animal bodies demonstrated a fragile materiality as they were woven into local and global histories. But some survive still; in 2018, Barnum's circus mandrill was conserved ahead of redisplay, and his age-dulled face was made bright once more.[107]

Taxidermy was a very physical thing, a coming together of ideas, materials, and animal bits, played out through craft. Scholarship has often considered these dead creatures as domesticated and stilled; by both the humans who produced them, and by their subsequent placement in a museum setting. This body of work has successfully demonstrated that taxidermy was a manifestation of colonial thinking and commodification. Yet, these objects were not simply inert, frozen in time, or largely symbolic. I have drawn on the archival traces of Bristol Museum's beastly inhabitants to explore how taxidermy was often characterised by movement and tactility. Skins were added to, manipulated and recontextualised in an unending attempt to recreate nature. They were consumed by insects and by rot; they had, and continue to have, a vibrant presence as aging animal objects. The animal specimen as a meeting place – as a site of contact between bodies, and as a physical expression of new ideas about nature and science – is encapsulated in the story of a gorilla mount. In 1899, under its new curator, Herbert Bolton, Bristol Museum reconsidered their gorilla specimen:

[105] 'Lion Wants a Home', *Sunday Express* (1947). Bristol Museum Archive.
[106] *Annual Report* (1943), 4, 12.
[107] Such work is now undertaken by dedicated museum conservators.

> the old gorilla, which was in a neglected state, has been touched up and thoroughly cleaned, and in a new case he will be looking towards the spectator in the centre of the front window, and will be seated upon a rock and leaning against the trunk of a tree, by which he will be holding on.[108]

This old skin, 'neglected' of human contact, was revisited; the curator could no longer keep his distance. He, the gorilla, was 'touched up', made clean and presentable and more believably lively through cutaneous contact. Bolton thought that the great ape would be enhanced by the addition of a rock to sit on and a tree to grasp, so the gorilla's hand-skin was placed (by the human hand) to grip onto a fabricated trunk. In this pose – with his rock and his tree – the gorilla's mounted skin looked towards the spectator.

[108] 'August Bank Holiday', *Bristol Mercury*. 5 August. 1899, 3.